

SCIENCE AND RELIGION—ANOTHER ATTEMPT AT RECONCILIATION

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

RECENT developments in science, notably physics and astronomy, have led, most naturally, to new attempts at effecting a reconciliation between religion and exact science. We have been assured by many that the majority of the modern physicists are Idealists, not Materialists or Mechanists, and that science has acquired a new humility by reason of the universal abandonment of the old conception of matter. We have been assured—by Gilbert Chesterton among others—that Agnosticism, Rationalism and Disbelief have run their course and are fading away, making room for a revival of religion and faith.

What more logical and comprehensible, then, than a new effort to establish an *entente cordiale* between Science and Religion?

In this paper we shall examine the contribution to that effort of Prof. Julian S. Huxley, grandson of the great Professor Thomas H. Huxley, in *The Atlantic Monthly* for March. As the editor of the magazine remarks, this contribution is the more interesting and significant because of the difference between its spirit and tenor and those of the contribution of the grandfather to the same subject in another era and another intellectual atmosphere.

“Religion Meets Science” is the title of the paper we are about to consider and comment upon. For the most part, the paper is admirable and thoroughly sound. It dwells on the adjustments religion has to make in the light of modern astronomy, modern physics, modern cosmology. The notions expressed in the Old and New Testaments are too dead to deserve even passing references. We have new views of the world, of space and time, of evolution and dissolution. We cannot indulge anthropomorphic fancies. We can-

not talk seriously about Jesus sitting at the right hand of God. We cannot talk of heaven as a place somewhere in space. We cannot talk of prayer and miraculous intervention in response to prayer. All this, we see, is naive and childish, and we must put away all puerile ideas about God, the next world, individual immortality.

But if we do put these things away, do we not also put away religion?

No, answers Prof. Huxley. Science may destroy certain theologies, even certain rigid and unprogressive religions, but it cannot destroy *religion*, which "is the outcome of the religious spirit, and the religious spirit is just as much a property of human nature as is the scientific spirit".

These words obviously call for a definition of the term religion and the phrase religious spirit. Prof. Huxley, aware of this, furnishes the definitions, but in a rather indirect and distinctly unsatisfactory way.

"The practical task of religion," he says, "is to help man to live and to decide how he shall use the knowledge and the power science gives him". Again: "What religion can do is to set up a scale of values for conduct and to provide emotional or spiritual driving force to help in getting them realized in practice".

Science, reasons Prof. Huxley, is morally and emotionally neutral. It has no scale of values, apart from the value of truth and knowledge, which of course it emphasizes and upholds. What we are to do with facts, ideas, opportunities supplied by science, it is the duty and privilege of religion to determine.

This is perfectly clear, if not at all new. But let us glance at Prof. Huxley's assumptions. Science, he premises, is morally neutral and has no scale of values, aside from the value of truth and knowledge. But to what sciences does this generalization refer? Physics has no scale of values. Astronomy and chemistry are morally neutral. So are several other sciences we call natural or physical. But is it a fact that ethics, economics and politics are morally and emotionally neutral sciences? Is history neutral and *sans* a scale of values? Is sociology?

The answer assuredly is that today no progressive thinker will admit for a moment that the social sciences are neutral morally and emotionally. Prof. Huxley is sadly behind the times.

Take the science of economics. Since Adam Smith it has been

held that economics has its scale of values and is morally quite partisan. Its business is to promote the material welfare of nations, to do away with unmerited poverty, unjust inequality, lack of fair opportunity. It is bound to point the way to economic justice and to permanent general prosperity. It has principles, postulates, objectives, ideals. Its exponents are *not* neutral, cold, objective. They take sides; they attack; they defend; they *fight* for what they consider the right solutions of problems.

Now, men of science who fight and work for objectives possess driving force. They do not have to borrow it.

What is true of economists is true of ethicists, sociologists, workers in political science. They severally have their respective ideals and standards—scales of values. They fight for these. Hence they are *not* morally neutral. What becomes of Prof. Huxley's whole argument if his major premise is false—as it is?

True, he may rejoin that the militant men of science just referred to *are also religious*, and that it is religion, not science, that furnished the driving force they display and apply. But that plea would beg the whole question. If science has scales of values, it does not require any aid from religion. And science is merely descriptive if it does not set goals and predict results. The social sciences have long since ceased to be merely descriptive. Any knowledge of economics, politics, ethics, sociology as taught for a century or more leaves no doubt upon the point.

It is sufficient to mention such names as Mill, Spencer, Toynbee, Comte, George, Ward, Proudhon, Hobson, Keynes, Dewey, Tawney. And one hardly needs adding that the radicals among the economists, sociologists and ethicists have never failed to stress the moral and human aspects of their sciences. Indeed, Prof. Huxley's own grandfather, who wrote much on political, social and ethical questions, even though they were not strictly within his special province, and who was a militant Agnostic, was never morally neutral or indifferent to social and spiritual values.

So much for facts. Dealing with the matter theoretically, is it not absurd to suppose that the social sciences *could* dispense with scales of values, with standards and ideals? Science is based on experience and observation. The human race has lived on our globe long enough to have discovered that societies, economic systems, political organizations cannot possibly exist without codes of con-

duct, principles of co-operation, restraints upon instinct and appetite. Science formulates and explains these codes, rules and standards. Laws, in truth worthy of the name are *discovered*, not arbitrarily enacted. They grow out of conditions and necessity. Religion has nothing whatever to do with them.

To quote George Santayana, "the principle of morality is naturalistic. Call it humanism or not, only a morality frankly relative to man's nature is worthy of man".

If all theologies and religions were abandoned tomorrow, morality and hence ethical science and ethical philosophy would remain. Morality changes with conditions and circumstances, precisely because it is human and relative to human needs under the dictates of association and co-operation, as of competition and permissible conflict.

Thus Prof. Huxley's basic assumption collapses under inquiry. Religion is *not* necessary to morality.

It is not necessary, either, to the arts and to the appreciation or cultivation of beauty. Religion has sought the aid of art and beauty, and for good utilitarian reasons. But the sense of beauty is natural to man, as it is in some degree to the lower animals, and would be cultivated and fostered in societies devoid of all religious institutions or ideas.

We are brought back, however, to the question: What essentially *is* religion? Can it be completely shed and renounced? Since Prof. Huxley does not help much in our search of adequate definitions and clear ideas, let us turn to Prof. Nathaniel Schmidt of Cornell University and his book on "The Coming Religion". According to him, religion is "devotion to the highest"—the highest truth, the highest duty, the highest beauty. Science, Prof. Schmidt holds, agreeing in this matter with Prof. Huxley, seeks knowledge for its own sake, without regard to its applications or effects, and by purely intellectual processes. Religion, like science, seeks knowledge and truth, but it seeks these in the realm of what is felt, desired and conceived as the highest good".

Now, there is no serious objection to giving the name Religion to the sentiment of devotion to the highest, but it is plain that this is an arbitrary proceeding. It does no grave harm, but no good, either. It would seem to be more sensible and more scientific to call sentiments and emotions by their own names. If I long for the highest

in music—for Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, say—I do so because this music gives me the deepest and keenest pleasure. It exalts and stirs me, and I like to feel exalted and moved. But why call this state of mind religious, and what do we gain by so calling it? We only confuse issues by so doing. If, again, I want to know the highest truth attainable in regard to my duty to others, or to society, I consult the best ethical teachers and guides. I may wish to be just, but the sentiment of justice is not enough—definite ideas and concepts of justice are necessary to right conduct. Prof Schmidt talks of one's feelings, but feelings are not always right. And even when right, they need interpretation and direction.

Prof. Schmidt falls into the same error as Prof. Huxley in asserting that the processes of science are purely and strictly intellectual, and, therefore, science is not interested in applications or effects. The sciences that have to do with human welfare and human progress are decidedly interested in applications and effects, and the workers in these sciences, as we have seen, are not incapable or ashamed of emotion when they enforce a truth or oppose a fallacy or falsehood.

We must conclude that religion cannot rationally lay claim to a monopoly of devotion to the highest good. Men not in the least religious are devoted to the highest good, and this because they are human and all things human are natural to them.

Let me try to offer a different definition of religion. It is a name for one's attitude toward the unknown, the mysterious, the unknowable, possibly. Contemplation of space, time, space-time, the stuff of the universe, the evolution and dissolution of the manifold forms that stuff has assumed and is assuming including what we call life and mind, fills one with wonder and awe. After all, science solves no ultimate problem. It does not pretend to be able to do so. It observes, classifies, generalizes, theorizes, verifies, modifies its theories and finally formulates so called laws. But it has its limits, and has no hope of transcending them.

The emotions aroused by contemplation of the great, unfathomable mysteries may be called religious emotions. That begs no question. But we must recognize that those emotions are unaccompanied by definite ideas. We marvel, we sigh, we ask questions, but no answer comes. Religion *remains* emotional. The explanations offered by the theologies are crude, inadequate, or even mean-

ingless. We have outgrown all the theologies. We have reached Agnosticism, and there we stick.

It is, therefore, neither necessary nor possible to reconcile science and religion. There is, in truth, no conflict. Religion is an emotion, and it is common to all human beings. Science cannot get rid of it, and does not desire to get rid of it. It is, moreover, an ennobling emotion. It engenders humility and modesty. It makes for better science and better conduct.

But when, in the name of religion, some theologian essays a theory of cosmic evolution, of life and destiny, science immediately steps in and simply asks for the evidence. Feelings are facts; theories are propositions to be demonstrated. No religion now professed, no theology now expounded, is able to demonstrate its propositions. It is preposterous to ask us to accept mere propositions on faith. Why should we? How can we and remain reasonable beings? Suppose some one claims to have had a revelation. The claim itself implies a theory that has to be proved. A revelation from whom? By what sign do we distinguish revelations? Are they real or imaginary? The prophets who have claimed revelations had preconceived notions to control their thinking. They had naive ideas of psychology and of the nature of evidence. Those ideas today provoke a smile, and yet we are expected to adhere to theologies and religious systems based on those primitive and puerile ideas!

We refuse to abdicate and stultify ourselves. We insist on studying religious beliefs and institutions scientifically, and when we do this, we are apt to conclude that religion is an emotion and nothing else, and an emotion compatible with Agnosticism. The Agnostic knows where science stops, but he also knows that emotions are not ideas, and that intellectual honesty and clear, sincere thinking are indispensable to all genuine human progress.